

Warm-Up Activities

By Yang Mingguang

As English teachers, we hope our students will take an active part in the classroom. It is our duty to make the classroom a lively and interesting place. How can we create such a classroom? My experience has taught me that warm-up activities can spark students' curiosity and promote a comfortable atmosphere.

Warm-up activities are activities or games carried out at the beginning of each class to motivate students so they can make good use of class time. I discovered this idea when I began teaching an evening class. I found the students were afraid to speak English, so I tried to play games with them. I put something in my handkerchief and asked them to guess what was in it by using their five senses. Our dialogue went something like this:

Student: Is it flexible?

Teacher: Yes.

Student: Can it be eaten?

Teacher: Yes.

Student: Is it chocolate?

Teacher: No.

Student: Is it chewing gum?

Teacher: Yes.

The students' questions were general, and I only answered "yes" or "no." Most students enjoyed the game and joined in the warm-up activities. Now, almost all students in my classes speak English loudly and freely.

Although the students' feedback confirmed that warm-up activities are a creative teaching tool, we need to adopt appropriate games. If the games are too difficult, the students cannot do them; but if the games are too easy, the students do not improve their English and may lose interest. Therefore, it is always better to link each short activity to what the students are studying.

Warm-up Activities

The following are some examples I have used successfully in my teaching.

Pop Quizzes

When I teach listening, I require my students to listen to the VOA or BBC news in their spare time. Before each lesson, I give the students two statements about current events, and I ask them to write on a piece of paper whether the statements are true or false. Each correct answer earns one point. Because the students want to earn the two points each time, they continue to listen to

the VOA or BBC news. Their scores also reflect their attendance, so they are seldom absent. In this way, the students gradually get into the habit of listening to the news and even enjoy the pop quizzes. By the end of the semester, all my students had greatly improved their listening abilities.

Plot Imagination

When I taught Pompeii by Robert Silverberg (Yang and Xu 1990:251), I began by asking my students to close their eyes. I asked them to pretend they were in Pompeii just before the eruption when everything was dark, and to imagine what they would see, hear, smell, feel, and think. After two minutes I said that they had survived the volcano, and to open their eyes. The assignment was to write down their thoughts during their imagination period to tell a story. Students' responses varied, but all reflected their feelings.

When teaching Button, Button by Richard Matheson (Yang and Xu 1990:283), I gave the students the following imagination exercise. I stated, "Suppose you came home one day and found a box with a button in it. On the box there was a note saying 'If you push the button, somebody will die, and you will get \$40,000.' What would you do with the box?" Not only do students need to write their decisions, but they also have to explain their reasons.

Picture Talking

Sometimes the teacher needs to provide visuals for the class. After showing a picture for one or two minutes, the teacher can ask the class to tell what they see in the picture, or to make up a story, or to list as many adjectives or adverbs as possible that can be used to describe the picture. Seeing the picture helps students to retell a story, and at the same time, the teacher can see whether the students understand the text correctly or not. This also helps to expand students' vocabulary.

Alternative Ending

Using "alternative endings" as a warm-up activity helps students express their ideas. For example, when I taught The Big Buffalo Bass by Weldon Stone (Yang and Xu 1990:34), I wrote on the blackboard, "If I caught the fish..." and asked my students to complete the story in five minutes. All responses showing that the students understand the story were acceptable.

Also, just before I finished teaching The \$99,000 Answer by Leonard Stern and Sydney Zelinka (Yang and Xu 1990:188), I asked my students to write their own endings for the story. When they returned to class, they all had different endings. This kind of task forces students to draw from their imaginations and experiences when interpreting the text. Moreover, it allows students to practise creative writing.

Saying/Proverb Questions

When I use this kind of warm-up activity, I write the first part of a saying, like "Genius is one percent inspiration and...", and leave the last part for the students to complete, like "ninety-nine percent perspiration." Then I ask them such questions as:

1. What do you think this sentence means?
2. What could you substitute for "inspiration" and "perspiration?"
3. How could you paraphrase this sentence?

4. How could you translate this sentence into Chinese?
5. Who said this sentence?
6. What is the grammatical construction?

This last question deals with parallel sentence construction, because the lesson was part of a grammar lesson that students were to learn.

Sometimes I write a proverb on the blackboard and ask if there is a similar proverb in Chinese. This activity teaches students some sayings and proverbs, thereby increasing the students' knowledge of the culture.

Follow-ups to Warm-ups:

These kinds of activities arouse students' interests and challenge them to use their imaginations. They train students to express their own ideas.

Once I finish a lesson, I ask my students to draw a simple sketch of the most impressive part of the text or to make several sketches telling the story. They can do the assignment at home, in class, or on the blackboard. For Pompeii, one student drew a volcano erupting near Pompeii and said "On August 24, A.D. 79, Mount Vesuvius erupted, raining death on thousands. Down in Pompeii, four miles from the summit, a tremendous explosion was heard."

For Button, Button, a student drew a couple conversing at a table. In the top right corner, a man was making a telephone call asking, "Do you really know each other, even though you are living in the same house?" Students have great fun when they recount the stories and talk about their pictures.

Outside Reading

I like to find material similar to the text for students to read at their leisure. I ask them to write down the general meanings of the story or their responses to the texts. For instance, after teaching The Big Buffalo Bass, I assigned The Old Man and the Sea by Ernest Hemingway for students to read and write their responses.

Conclusion

These warm-up activities motivate students. Not only do they arouse students' interests and associations with the texts, but they can also improve their thinking skills. No sooner has the class begun than the students become involved in these creative activities, which in turn foster a positive learning environment.

References

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